

**‘The Cuban Educational System: Entanglements,
Influences and Transfers.’**

**Report on a Workshop held in Havana, April 19 and
20, 2017, organized by the Instituto de Historia de
Cuba, Havana and the Department of Economic and
Social History of the University of Vienna.**

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It is common knowledge that the self-declared Socialist state that is Cuba has entered uncharted territories in education. There is little research, however, on the far-reaching international resonance of the Cuban educational system, with regard to relations with both the existing community of socialist states and with Asia, Africa and Latin America. On the 19th and 20th of April, 2017, a research workshop, ‘The Cuban Educational System: Entanglements, Influences and Transfers’, took place in Havana. Invitations to participate in this event were extended by the Cuban Institute of History (Instituto de Historia de Cuba) and the Austrian Science Funded research project ‘Experts in Development’ and ‘Socialist Aid in the era of global competition between political systems West and East’ (Project Leader: Berthold Unfried, Department of Economic and Social History, Vienna University).

The main task throughout this two-day event, comprising fourteen presentations in total, was, on the one hand, to comprehend the educational influences of the socialist countries on Cuba and, on the other, to trace the transnational effects of Cuban educational practices within the scope of “Cuban Internationalism” in countries of the Global South. Additionally, the activity was meant to create a space where researchers from Cuba and beyond could exchange ideas and insights emerging from state of the art research in their

areas of expertise and bring diverse perspectives to bear on the object of enquiry. In addition to presentations based on scientific research, various participants either shared first hand experiences or exclusive historic material with the audience. Scientific debate and personal exchanges took place ‘cheek by jowl’ at the heart of a one and a half days event involving around 50 interventions.

During his introductory speech, Rané Gonzales Barrios (Instituto de Historia, Havana) described the internationalist orientation as an essential feature of the Cuban independence movement from its very beginnings. In his manifesto of 10 October 1868, Carlos Manuel de Céspedes had already stressed the bond between the Cuban nation and all other peoples – a relationship which, according to González, is fundamental for Cuba’s revolutionary self-concept, and remains relevant to the present day. More than 3,000 foreigners fought on the side of the insurgent *Mambises*, as the guerrilla soldiers were called who in the liberation wars between 1868 and 1898 fought the Spanish troops for Cuban independence. Three of them even managed to hold the highest generalship. González considered this historical background crucial to comprehend the politics of internationalism as Cuba’s way of “paying a debt to humanity”.

Nonetheless, the central concepts in the title of the workshop need to be questioned, argued Felipe Pérez Cruz (Universidad de las Ciencias Pedagógicas Enrique José Varona, Havana). The ‘transfer’ concept runs the risk of eurocentric distortion which is also embodied in the idea that “European socialism” provides the prototype for Cuban society, thus overlooking socialism’s African, Asian or Latin American special forms. Pérez outlined the matrix of an investigative approach capable of capturing what lies at the heart of the transfer of knowledge processes from one context to another. At a historical-methodological level, a before-after-analysis is needed to foster a clear understanding of the state of education at the time of the Cuban revolution in 1959, one which takes into account educational concepts and praxis in the GDR and the Soviet Union. Pérez indicated that, at least, in the Cuban case, local-made decisions which were meant to address endogenous problems, contradictions and debates were more relevant to the development of the educational system than ideas on education borrowed from foreign socialist countries.

The Cuban Literacy Programme certainly had an international impact. Luisa Yara Campos Gallardo (Museo Nacional de Alfabetización, Havana) provided, in her presentation of recent research results, insights into the hitherto little known participation of foreign activists in the Cuban Literacy Campaign of 1961. Campos stressed the symbolic significance of that group, even though its participation in absolute numbers was small - 260 internationalists in comparison with 268,160 Cuban literacy workers. According to Campos, there is no exogenous influence on contents or methods of the campaign to be observed. It is remarkable, however, that of the 26 nations involved, Spain, the USA and Mexico were represented by the largest contingents. Meanwhile the socialist countries remained substantially under-represented. For example, there was only one activist from the GDR, a citizen who acted from individual motives, and none from the Soviet Union. This situation led to interesting insights into the early phase of socialist cooperation with Cuba in the field of education.

Also referring to an early form of internationally oriented cooperation in education, Eugena Palomares Ferrales (IPU Tomás David Royo, Havana) focused on the *Escuela José Martí* in the east of the Cuban capital, where from 1961 onward, children from Africa, Asia and Latin America, many of them orphans of fallen fighters, were received first on an occasional basis and later in a more systematic manner. In Palomares' view, this school pioneered a programme of Cuban cooperation, with countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America, in the field of education.

Tobias Kriele (Mainz) called for an understanding of the GDR's support to Cuba in the area of higher education in the 1960s. It was argued that it can be seen as an expression of a specific socialist form of globalization. The two countries established relationships in the area of education, particularly in higher education, some time before they did this on a diplomatic level. The initiative in the form of requests for guidance and practical support emanated from the Cuban side. Although the GDR also did pursue its particular interests by offering counseling and assistance, which on occasion would bring her into conflict with Cuban practice, the internal instructions for advisers to avoid their country being perceived as a colonial power ultimately prevailed. As Kriele showed, based on the

example of the GDR-advised foundation of the Cuban Workers' Faculties, the implementation process involved was conceived as a solution to concrete, local requirements and was strongly influenced by national, i.e. Cuban precursor institutions. This led Kriele to conclude that the newly-created educational establishments can be considered as being genuinely Cuban.

A contemporary witness, Juan Miguel Pantaleón Fundora (Havana), delivered a report on the creation of the international scholarship program in the *Isla de la Juventud* (Isle of Youth). In 1977, the island's two first schools with a polytechnical orientation began to focus particularly on students from the People's Republic of Mozambique. The target group was extended to African, Asian and Latin American countries, raising the number of pupils, formed on the island, to 25,000 in 1990. Pantaleón described some of the pedagogical, political and administrative challenges for the Cuban decision-makers induced by the pupils' highly multicultural composition. Although classes were mainly taught in Spanish, the major concerns included not only to respect the pupils' national traditions, but also stressing them and, in some cases, making them known for the first time. Many of the top 10% alumni became representatives of the local *Intelligentsia* in their homelands. Pantaleón considered this as proof of the Cuban educational assistance programme's success.

The Cuban contribution to international cooperation with countries of the Global South in the area of education in the Isle of Youth was the topic of the PhD project of Dayana Murgua Méndez's (Instituto de Historia de Cuba, Havana) that she presented at the conference. Murgua observed that existing scientific knowledge of this educational program, which involved students from 40 nations, is still fragmentary. Her own research interest focuses on the role the Cuban educational practice on the Isle of Youth played in generating cultural values and national identities, considering the international relationships between Cuba and the students' countries of origin. Murgua argued that, since the causal correlations are mutual, the features of the international program, as part of the Cuban education system, need to be investigated. It was argued, during the ensuing debate, that the Isle of Youth-program has probably to be considered one of the most significant South-South-cooperation ventures in the area of

education. Drawing inspiration from this, the President of the Instituto de Historia de Cuba, González Barrios, announced a specific panel on the Youth Isle's educational programs to be included in the programme of the II International Symposium "Cuban Revolution. Genesis and historical development". This symposium is to be held from 24-26 October, 2017 in Havana.

Berthold Unfried (Vienna University) proposed viewing the development of "Cuban Internationalism" in three cycles. During the first cycle from 1959 to 1970, Cuba led the way for the *tricontinental* union of Asian, African and Latin American nations, all marginalized in the context of international power relations. During the second cycle, 1975 to 1990, Cuba's "internationalist" practice became integrated into the socialist world system and its particular division of labour. Unfried argued that this phase is marked by the flow of assessors, specialists, professionals and workforce from Cuba to Africa (especially to Angola), to and from the European socialist countries, and from foreign countries towards Cuba, with the epicenter being the Isle of Youth. Unfried pointed to a third cycle, starting in 1990 and persisting until today. In this phase, Cuba exported services "to the mutual benefit" of the two countries involved. It proffered unilateral humanitarian emergency aid to other countries. Unfried considered "Cuban Internationalism", viewed in the context of the "Global History of Internationalisms", as being comparable with European socialist "International Solidarity" and "Socialist Aid" practices. Cuba, which conceived of itself as an "underdeveloped" country, designed its own "Cuban cycle of socialist development" which aimed at the integration of the marginalized countries from Asia, Africa and Latin America into the global historical process.

Case studies concerning the "internationalist" dispatching of personnel, in this case brigades of young Cuban undergraduate teachers (*destacamentos internacionalistas*) to Angola and Nicaragua were provided by Nancy Jiménez Rodríguez (Havana), author of a book on this topic, Ramón Cuétara López (Universidad de las Ciencias Pedagógicas Enrique José Varona, Havana) and Reinaldo Guido Castaño Spenglert (Havana).

During the research talk, the immense interest shown by the community of Cuban scholars in history of education topics became evident. There were repeated demands to

regard the history of the Cuban revolution as a process whose contradictions had to be highlighted. The event stimulated Cuban interest in the Cuban revolution's international resonance, thus potentially inspiring a more global historical approach to future research in the area. Institute director René González Barrios announced the forthcoming creation of an e-journal under the name of *República Universal*. It would serve to facilitate the international research community's access to recent scientific results on historical topics connected with Cuba, therefore linking national and international research on post-revolutionary Cuba. The intense debates during the workshop provide hope that Cuba, being an important actor in South-South international relations, could be a focal location of scientific analysis of these relations.